

# How to Get a Gig

You've rehearsed for months, fine-tuned your set list, played for friends and family and even started working on your "look." Now it's time to get your first gig. Here's what you need to know.

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**F**or those who are unfamiliar with the term, a gig is a job performing music. It can be at a school dance, church social, community hall, coffee house, music club or a friend's party. Each may attract a different type of crowd, but they're all gigs. Almost all musicians love to play in front of audiences, and love it even more when they get paid to do so. But the actual booking of the gig...that's less fun. However, landing gigs is a skill you can learn, practice and master. The first step is finding opportunities that fit your music.

## FINDING A GIG

Performing music presents a Catch-22. It's hard to get booked without experience—and you can't get experience without getting booked. Interestingly, musicians have faced this problem for ages and it's one of the things that actually helps create new styles of music. A bunch of people who can't land conventional gigs get together and start playing the music they like for each other. The next thing you know, a "scene" is born.

**Be the life of a party.** Probably the easiest gig you can set up is at a party. Maybe a friend is having a birthday or has a graduating sibling. Play that party, and you have a chance to perform for an audience of peers. You may even get paid for it. The downside is that you won't be playing for strangers. The people at the party won't be totally objective about your music. But that's not always a bad thing the first time out: having some fans who will boost your confidence—and maybe even offer some constructive criticism—can prepare you for the next steps.

**Get schooled.** Functions, like dances and canteens at your school—or other schools in your district—can offer great opportunities. These often *do* pay and they allow you to play for a larger audience. Your friends will still be there, but so will kids you don't normally hang out with. It's a little more objective than playing at a party.

Then there are the college and prep-school circuits: Unlike conventional public schools, secondary-level, boarding prep schools must find creative ways to entertain their sometimes large student populations every weekend, and create a staffed student-activities department for that purpose. Prep-school students often make a receptive, enthusiastic audience; in fact, many “known” bands have launched their careers from this market. Because prep school populations are diverse, student activities heads are constantly in need of all different kinds of music. That's where you come in. Prep school gigs are shorter (anywhere from 90 minutes for an acoustic act and up to three hours for a band) and generally get started earlier than club gigs. Best of all, the pay can be quite generous. It's not unheard of for an acoustic-guitar duo to fetch \$500 for a 90-minute performance. Payment is often presented before the performance. If you're lucky, refreshments and accommodations may be thrown in, too.

**Branch out.** The next step is to play for strangers. If you're an acoustic musician, you can find lots of opportunities at coffee houses, listening rooms and bookstores. They may not pay at all (although you may be able to “pass the hat”), but you can usually count on an attentive audience and will gain lots of experience. You may also discover performance opportunities at area parks.

Of course, there are also music clubs. While many of the bars and nightclubs that offer live music are off limits to kids under 21, there are alcohol-free clubs that cater to younger bands and their fans. Research these. You may not make a ton of money here, but you can really build your fan base and meet like-minded musicians.

Other opportunities can be had at weddings, business functions, restaurants, gallery openings and the like, but you need to make sure

that your music is appropriate for these occasions. If you're a jazz pianist, for example, you'll probably be more appealing to a wedding party as a solo act than you will in your alter-ego role as lead singer of the Screamers.

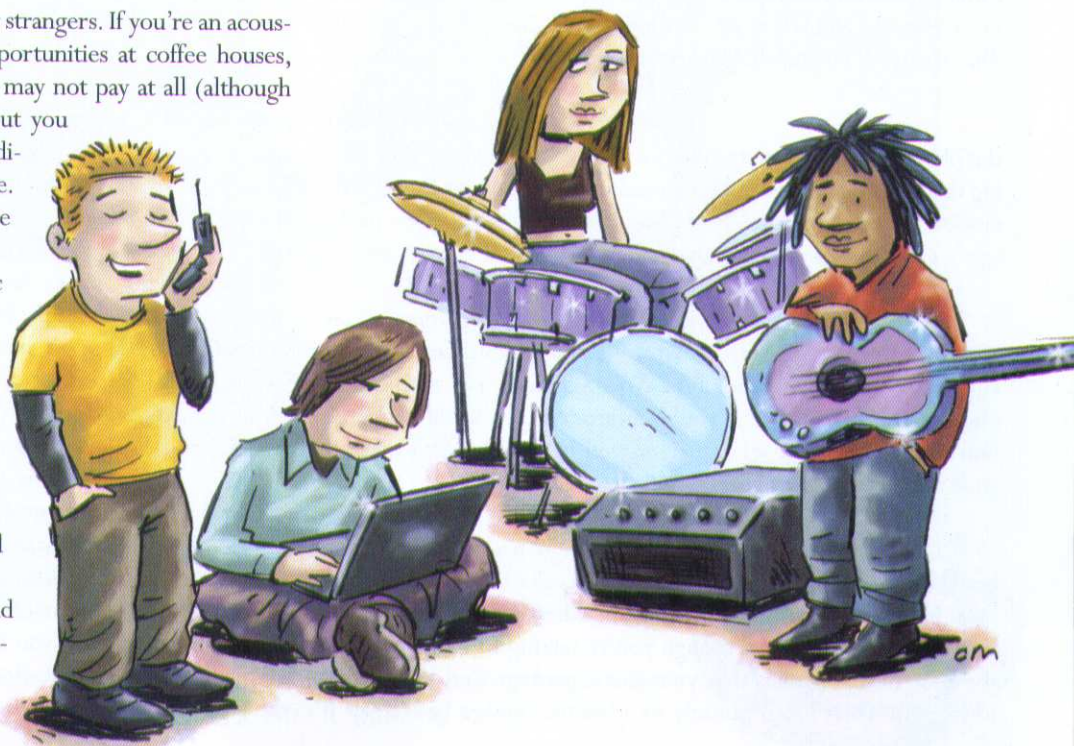
**Get on the circuit.** Local gigs are great, but if you have a little more experience and have access to transportation, your next step is to branch out. All of the above opportunities in your hometown are also available in other communities within driving distance. Your job is to find—and land—those gigs.

## GETTING THE GIG

So how do you get started? First, you'll want to put together a decent “promo kit” that includes pertinent information about the band, a photo, press clippings (if available) and a two- or three-song demo CD, recorded as professionally as possible, with your best, no-excuses performances of your best songs.

Start with a one-page bio describing your music, where you've played, names of the band members and so forth. Don't get too wordy; booking people have to look at *a lot* of these things. If you play more covers than originals, consider enclosing a “master set list” that includes all the songs you're capable of playing on any given evening. Feel free to include written recommendations and reviews in excerpted form on a single page. Try to keep the total number of pages to a minimum. The less paper people have to handle, the better.

Speaking of paper-less communications, you'll probably also want to have some kind of web presence. You can use your web page to display the information listed above, and to post music downloads, tour schedules, a discussion board and more.



## MAKING THE ROUNDS

You've got your package, you're well-rehearsed and ready to go. Now comes the fun part: selling the band. Step one: find out who handles booking for the places you want to play. This may take some research. Of course, you could take the easy way out and head straight to the local booking agent. But with a busy agency, there's a good chance you'll be lumped in with all the other hope-

fuls who are trying to get their *own* careers started. Also, be prepared to pony up at least 20 percent of what the venue pays you, no matter how measly the take might be. Yes, a good agent can help you land the occasional gig, but when it comes to the business arrangements, anything you can do for yourself often yields better results. Here are a few simple rules to follow:

**Prepare your materials.** Have your demo and the rest of your package ready. You may even want to have the materials in an envelope so it's easier to get them in the mail.

**Work the phone.** While you could send a package "cold," it's much better to make contact first, either by phone or email. A good, professional phone manner is important. And while it can be intimidating to talk to a booker—some may make it clear that they don't really need to hear from you—if you stay focused, clear, direct and polite, you'll most likely get the booker to take the call. Introduce yourself, say the name of your act and explain why you've called. Ask if you can send more material and when you can follow up. Then politely sign off. The whole call will probably take three minutes.

**Write a cover letter and send your stuff.** As soon as you get off the phone, finish prepping your package. Write a short note saying that, as you discussed, you are submitting your act for consideration. Be sure to write clearly, and label everything in the package—CD, band bio, cover letter, etc.—with your contact info.

**Schedule your booking time efficiently.** One of the worst wastes of time is playing phone tag with busy booking agents. Leaving messages can be fruitless: some of these people simply refuse to return phone calls. They figure, if you're interested, you'll call back. So, find out when your contact person will be available and make it your mission to call at that time.

**Follow up effectively.** After your package has been with the booker for a reasonable period (two weeks is a good rule of thumb), it's time to follow up. Again, when you call, introduce yourself and your act, as though you're talking to the person for the first time. Explain that you sent a package and you're following up. Then listen politely to what the booker has to say. If



the person has not listened to your material, don't get angry, or say, "Why not? You agreed to." That will stamp you as an amateur deluxe. If the person has not listened, simply say thanks, and ask when you can try back. It may take a few calls, but polite persistence will get you more than forcing the issue.

## HOW MUCH?

Finally, there's that defining moment when you're asked, "What do you guys charge?" Unfortunately, there are no hard-and-fast rules regarding pricing. Although you may be able to fetch \$750 for playing two hours at a prep school, the following weekend it could be a four-hour roadhouse set for only \$100. In this business, the key is flexibility.

Before naming a price, try to find out what other bands are getting at a particular venue, and then attempt to work within those parameters. If it's a club, chances are you'll have to accept whatever they're paying, but you may want to try to negotiate, particularly if there's a cover charge involved. If you think you can draw a good crowd, don't be afraid to say so, and at the same time ask for a higher "guarantee."

Remember that you don't want to price yourself out of the game altogether. On any given weekend you'll be competing against significantly cheaper (or free) forms of entertainment. Though it makes good business sense to adopt a firm price, shaving a few bucks off your figure here and there may mean that you're actually working more often. That said, don't settle for just anything. These days, club owners are more than happy to schedule five different bands on the same night, paying each one next to nothing (or absolutely nothing). A few of these non-paying, good-exposure type gigs are fine every once in a while, but try not to make them your main staple.

Finally, be sure to find out about any onstage requirements, such as whether there is in-house sound equipment. You will also want to know how many sets you'll be required to play, time allowed for breaks and other details. For larger jobs such as schools, business functions and the like, draw up a simple contract listing the date and time of the event, your fee and any other necessary information. If you want to be on the safe side, consider asking for payment in the form of a cashier's check, particularly if the gig is a private function for someone you don't know. **T**